

Desire under the Closed Water: Homoeroticism in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Introduction

The critic, Barbara Smith, first pointed out the theme of lesbianism in Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973). As she argues in her insightful discussion on the novel in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), despite the disguise as heterosexual love, *Sula* is in reality a "lesbian novel":

... I discovered in rereading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives. (175)

Smith, however, goes on to write that, in *Sula*, "physical sexuality is overtly expressed only between men and women" (175) and adds that it is a lesbian novel only in the sense of "the emotions expressed" (180). Smith also writes, "Obviously Morrison did not intend the reader to perceive Sula's and Nel's relationship as inherently lesbian" (181), and concludes that the writer is not really intent on describing a homosexual (and physical) love between two women. Contrary to what Smith argues, however, Morrison in fact portrays the two women's lesbian sexuality, and the story contains descriptions of their sexual acts in a recognizable way. They are not explicitly written, but the "physical sexuality" of Sula and Nel is clearly present in the story expressed as unmistakable metaphors. In this paper, I will focus on the episode of the killing of Chicken Little and discuss the homoeroticism between the two girls in *Sula*.

1. Chicken Little

"Chicken Little" usually refers to a chicken in a fairy tale of the same title. When an acorn falls on its head, the chicken believes that the sky is falling. The chicken decides to tell everyone about it, and starts a stampede with other animals, eventually leading them into a cave, where all are eaten by a fox. The story is an allegory warning about the folly of cowardly behavior, or a cautionary tale about the importance of not paying attention to false rumors.⁽¹⁾

Interestingly, the plotline of *Sula* includes the basic plot elements of the Chicken Little tale. In the concluding chapter of *Sula*, a parade of residents led by Shadrack walk into a tunnel. The tunnel then collapses, killing the people inside. Here the chicken's words "the sky is falling" can be translated into the "unexpectedness" of "death or dying" that Shadrack fears most. Chicken Little plays a major role in the entire narrative structure of the novel, *Sula*.

"Chicken Little" of the fairy tale is also the name of a little boy in *Sula*, who in spite of his brief appearance as a living character (pp. 59-61), is given a very important part to play in the novel. This fact is hardly noticed, as it is ingeniously concealed in a deceptively simple episode of the boy, but it is in fact the key to understanding the entire text. Chicken Little plays as significant a role in *Sula* as the repeated image of "the dark closed place in the water." The "closed water" appears in the novel's important scenes seven times (61, 62, 101, 118, 141, 170, and 170). The closed water appears for the first and second time as the actual scene after Chicken Little is thrown into the river, and later it is persistently repeated in the text as an *image*. Chicken Little enters the story for the first time in July 1922, when Sula and Nel are playing together lying on the grass.

For our present discussion we should list in rough chronological order three major events that happened to the two girls this summer prior to this incident. They are: (1) meeting with Ajax and their sexual awakening; (2) Sula's cutting off the tip of her finger; and (3) Sula's overhearing her mother saying, "I just don't like her [Sula]."

Let us begin with the first event. Right from the beginning, the chapter chronicling the year 1922 describes the way how the two girls discover their sexual awakening, as they become attracted to men's sexual gaze, gestures, and words. The girls are fascinated with Ajax's smooth crotches covered by gabardine. They are, in other words, attracted less to the "place where the mystery curled" under the gabardine, than to the "smooth vanilla crotches." Ajax has crotches that look feminized, crotches characterized by its smooth surface, not by its erectness. In describing his crotches, the text repeatedly uses such ice cream-related expressions as "cream-colored," "lemon-yellow," and "vanilla" (50). The two places introduced in this chapter – the ice cream parlor Sula and Nel frequent, and the path leading to the shop (where Ajax is) – represent the image of the female sexual organ, in conjunction with the "chocolate halls" of the primary school where the two girls first met, and the "holes" they would dig later in the novel. Both Nel and Sula picture themselves as hoping to engage in heterosexual love, such as a woman waiting for "some fiery prince" Nel imagines and a valiant rider on a galloping white horse Sula dreams of (51-52), but the objects of their desires are "existences that complement each other," rather than heterosexual love objects. What they really wished for is to create something by themselves alone; that is, by the two who are both black and female: "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (52).

Soon after this, the second incident involving the cutting of Sula's finger occurs. The episode contains a sexual element that is cleverly disguised behind the social and ethnical background about the Irish immigrant boys bullying black children. In fact, the "harassment" of

Nel by the four Irish boys in “knickers” contains a thinly-veiled sexual allusion: “These particular boys caught Nel once and pushed her from hand to hand until they grew tired of the frightened helpless face” (54). Obviously the boys’ sexual interest in Nel, amplified by their awareness of ethnicity, is driving them into action. Equally of importance is the fact that young Sula and Nel went all the way to the places where boys hung around, looking for “sexual excitement” rather than the boys themselves. Sula’s confrontation with the boys virtually means a duel over Nel. Nel felt disgusted with Sula who cut the tip of her finger off to defend Nel. Nel should have been grateful to Sula for doing so because it was for her sake. But Nel didn’t feel grateful because she felt that Sula’s cutting of her finger was the most unexciting and disappointing way of fighting with the boys.

The third major incident involves Sula overhearing her mother Hannah saying, “I love Sula. I just don’t like her.” Hannah means she loves Sula, since Sula is her daughter after all, but her words also mean that Hannah cannot understand her daughter’s personality and she does not like her as a person. The Peace women, Eva, Hannah, and Sula, have one characteristic in common: “manlove.” Hannah loves many men, is loved by them, and casually has sexual intercourse with them. “Manlove” has become part of her daily life. However, Sula is clearly different from Eva and Hannah. Like her mother, Sula thinks having a sex is part of her daily routine, but she never finds love there. The scene where Hannah says, “They different people” (57), was a pronouncement of Sula being different and heterogeneous, and not like Hannah and Eva. It, at the same time, suggests the distance between Sula and heterosexuality.

2. Homoeroticism and Its Metaphor

Three incidents, as discussed above, all point to the same direction when the homoerotic scene of Nel and Sula begins, followed by the killing of Chicken Little. While the girls are lying on the grass on their stomachs, they contemplate “the wildness that had come upon them so suddenly.” The small breasts of the girls sprawling on the grass feel “pleasant discomfort.” They “stroked the blades up and down, up and down,” and strip the bark off the twig, exposing its “smooth, cream innocence.” Nel, who “moved easily to the next stage,” tears up the grass, and then Sula draws patterns with her twig in the bare spot Nel made. Nel becomes “impatient,” makes a hole on the ground “rhythmically and intensely,” and then Sula “copied” her act. Nel begins “a more strenuous digging,” rising to her knees to make the hole deeper, and Sula also does the same thing until the two holes join and become one big hole. After that, the two girls throw twigs and debris into the hole with gestures of loathing. After doing all of this, they carefully replace the dirt and grass there. They do not exchange a single word during the course of their act, overcome by “unspeakable restlessness and agitation”(57-59). The sexual connotation of the passage quoted above is obvious, and what should be noted is that it has an established pattern. That is, Nel always initiates each step while Sula follows her acts. Let us review the process in the order it happens:

1. Nel touches the grass.
2. Sula copies her.
3. Nel pulls away the bark of a twig.
4. Sula copies her.
5. Nel pulls away the grass.
6. Sula draws patterns in the cleared space.
7. Nel pokes her twig into the earth.
8. Sula copies her.
9. Nel digs the hole deeper.
10. Sula copies her.
11. Nel throws her twig into the hole.
12. Sula copies her.
13. Nel throws debris into the hole.
14. Sula copies her.

Thus it is Nel who always takes the initiative in a series of sexual acts.

Immediately after the two girls finished the process above, Chicken Little in knickers comes up to them, walking along the river. The boy's sudden appearance plunges them into fear. Nel calls out to Chicken Little, and Sula also stops him to coax him into climbing up a tree. They are taking necessary actions as they think Chicken Little might have seen what they were doing. The novel does not make it clear whether or not Chicken Little really saw the act they were engaged in. Even if he did, it is not certain whether he understood the meaning of the act they were caught doing, but the two girls – or we should say Nel – feared that Chicken Little might tell the people what they were doing because he, who kept saying “I’m a tell my brovver” (60), was a blabbermouth, just as the Chicken Little of the fairy tale was. Sula and Nel were quick in responding to his words, copying and repeating them in unison. The man hiding behind Chicken Little and the boy's too big knickers symbolize the male power and the heterosexual social system supporting it.⁽²⁾ Chicken Little is a scout who has been sent out by them.

In this scene, Nel calls out to Chicken Little saying, “You scared we gone take your bugger away?” (59). As “bugger,” which means “nasal mucus,” also has the meaning of “sodomite” and “eavesdropper,” Nel's words are strongly suggestive of their situation. In other words, Chicken is an “eavesdropper” and the girls are “homosexuals.” As if to alleviate Nel's fears, Sula coaxes Chicken Little into climbing high up in the tree, probably with the intention of pushing him off. She fails, but then picks up the boy by his hands and swings him around and around. The stretched body of Chicken Little in his ballooned knickers serves as a metaphor for penis. In reality, swinging around a boy and hurling him into a river would require the physical prowess far beyond the capacity of a 12-year-old girl. Her throw, which ignores the laws of physics, works more as a symbolic metaphor than as a realistic description, just as Milkman flying off the cliff in the final scene of *Song of Solomon* (1977). It is suggested that Chicken Little was somehow submerged in the water by Sula as a form of child's play and that Nel actually

manipulated her to do so, although the descriptions of the incident are sparse and ambiguous as below:

When he [Chicken] slipped from her [Sula] hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. (60-61)

The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hand and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. (61)

It is Nel who first speaks – “Nel spoke first. ‘Somebody saw’” (61). Her words imply that Nel's primary concern is to cover up the murder that was successfully carried out before her very eyes. Sula takes Nel's words as a cue to rush to Shadrack's house on the other side of the river in order to find out whether he witnessed the murder or not. But Sula fails in her attempt and comes back to “Nel and the dark closed place” (62). The juxtaposition of Nel and the dark water is worth noting here because the novel employs the same device in the scene where Nel and Sula reunite after ten years (discussed later in more detail). The context of the story makes it clear that the killing of Chicken Little was carried out in collaboration, with Nel ordering it and Sula executing it. Nel manages the difficult feat of putting the blame for the death of Chicken Little on Sula alone, saying soothingly to Sula: “Sh, sh. Don't, don't. You didn't mean it. It ain't your fault. Sh. Sh. Come on, Le's go, Sula. Come on, now” (62-63). By denying Sula's responsibility in this way, Nel succeeds in thrusting it onto her while distancing herself from it. At Chicken Little's funeral Sula keeps crying, but Nel remains calm. Then Nel gradually pulls away from Sula, as their firmly held hands “relaxed slowly until during the walk back home their fingers were laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends” (66). After this incident, Nel slowly disengages herself from her friendship with Sula, and the process culminates in her marriage. Consciously or not, Nel used Sula so that she could conceal her “desire that is not legitimized.” Trudia Harris and Karen Carmean claim that the death of Chicken Little strengthened the bond between the two girls, but in fact what his death signifies is the beginning of their separation.

In spite of her apparently stable life, Chicken Little's death casts a shadow over Nel. Two years before Chicken Little's incident, Nel swore that she would never lead a life like her mother Helene, and decided to live her own life:

“I'm me,” she whispered. “Me.”

Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant.

“I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.”

Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. . . .

“Me,” she murmured. (28)

This strong “me-ness” of Nel suggests a deep gap between her and her parents (especially Helene), and her rejection of the system of family relationships such as husbands and wives, or parents and children. Nel’s “no” to Helene means exactly her “no” to Helene’s deep-seated hatred for sex. In spite of this, however, Nel marries five years after the event involving Chicken Little, and chooses to live the life of a dutiful wife and devoted mother, well-respected in the local community. The “me-ness” has transferred to Sula, and becomes Sula’s guiding principle of behavior, ruling her for the rest of her life. When Eva tells Sula to get married and have a baby, she replies, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Sula’s “me-ness” is succinctly expressed in her outspokenness, and refusal of marriage and childbearing, or an established and socially accepted way of life. The irony is that later in the novel, in the scene of Nel’s visit to Sula’s deathbed, Sula insists on this me-ness while Nel is urged to dissuade her from the idea (142-143). Nel married Jude not because she loved him, but because she wanted to take on the role of “wife” supporting him. Nel was no longer what she had been, a girl who chanted to herself, “I’m me.” She has clearly undergone a change since the killing of Chicken Little. She had to distance herself from Sula; that is, she had to conceal her sexuality and her crime of murder. In order to make her deception complete, marriage was necessary, even though the marriage is one without love.

3. Desire under the Dark Water

In 1937 when Sula returns to the Bottom after a ten-year interval, Nel’s heart that had been covered with “a steady gray web” (95-96) starts to shine again. Nel has a “rib-scraping laugh” (98) and as she breaks into a laughter that “weakened her knees and pressed her bladder into action” (97), she rushes into the bathroom. The joy Sula brings Nel always carries physical and sexual connotations. The relationship they had enjoyed when they were at the riverside is being re-enacted here in a different fashion. Sula, who has returned to her hometown after a decade, has a bitter argument with her grandmother, Eva. Sula starts to have the delusion that she will be killed by Eva unless she kills her first, and out of fear she puts Eva into a home for the elderly. As Sula informs Nel about what she did to Eva, she also consults Nel about what to do, saying: “Maybe I should have talked to you about it first. You always had better sense than me. Whenever I was scared, you knew just what to do” (101). The moment Sula says this, the “closed place in the water spread before them” (101). With the sudden reemergence of the water, the Chicken Little incident is juxtaposed with the present scene. When Sula consults with Nel, Nel immediately gives detailed advice, telling her to transfer Eva’s insurance and bank account to Sula’s name. Once Sula follows Nel’s instructions, Eva will be left with no assets in her name. This means that although it was Sula who sent Eva to the nursery home, it is Nel who is truly responsible for her virtual demise in the community. Moreover, since Nel is the one who actually gave these instructions, she starts to always be concerned as to how she is viewed by

the people in the community. This is evident in her words such as “People say I’m scheming” and “Well, tongues will wag.”

The structural aspects of the relationship between Nel and Sula in 1937 explain the entire course of events described earlier in the novel, in which Sula caused Chicken Little to drown and Nel managed to cover up his killing; she later worried about how her relationship with Sula would be thought of by the community and took measures to save appearances (i.e., her marriage). In 1965, twenty-eight years after her last meeting with Sula, Nel pays a visit to Eva in an elderly home, and Eva asks her about the killing of Chicken Little because Eva and Chicken Little, having been eliminated from society, are both victims of Nel’s and Sula’s conspiracy.

When Sula slept with Nel’s husband, Jude, the revived friendship between Sula and Nel faded away. It is not revealed in the novel as to why Sula had a sexual relationship with Jude, but the most plausible explanation is that it was the best way for her to get closer to Nel. Sula came back to the Bottom after a ten-year absence because she wanted Nel (120). For Sula, a male lover could not be someone who is a “friend,” “comrade,” or “other half of her equation”(121). Sula tried in vain to keep her distance from Nel. The best way to give up the one she loves is to become the one she loves herself. Only by incorporating the one she loves inside herself can she survive the loss of her love. For Nel, Sula’s sexual relationship with Jude means her betrayal of their friendship, while for Sula it was the only way to endure Nel’s betrayal. Nel later blames Sula, saying she “didn’t even love him [Jude]” (144), but for Sula, Nel is missing the point, for it is only natural that Sula didn’t love him because all she wanted was to identify herself with Nel, who didn’t love him either. Jude has been just a front for the two lovers to survive in a heterosexist society. Nel and Sula needed him as the medium through which they could fulfill their mutual desire.

In fact, as the scene unfolds, we are not certainly sure as to whom, Sula or Jude, Nel’s anger is being directed towards. While Nel is angry with Sula, she hardly thinks about Jude, and finds herself always thinking about what Sula would do if she were here (108). As Nel’s and Jude’s relationship was based not on love, but obligation, it was inevitable that it would end once the marriage, or their social obligation, came to an end. It should be pointed out that the novel described the wedding of Jude and Nel as being “rather like a funeral” (80). This means that there are not five, but six death-related events in *Sula*: in addition to the funerals of Helene’s grandmother Cecile, Chicken Little, Hannah, Sula, and the burial in the tunnel, there is Nel’s funeral. Nel, who witnessed others’ funerals, seems to have outlived them all, but in fact it turns out that her own funeral was already held when she was young. Sula said that “every colored woman in this country” was “dying” (143), because she was sure that they did not live their lives as they desired.

4. What Rises from the Bottom of the Water

It was not until twenty-four years after Sula’s death that Nel recognizes the bond between

her and Sula. Her recognition is achieved through the dialogue with Eva who can no longer conduct or understand even an ordinary conversation. The most important revelation is sometimes delivered through non-dialectical and irrational dialogue in Toni Morrison's novels. Nel pays a visit to Eva, now a senile old woman living in a nursery home. Nel, to Eva's sudden question asking if she committed the crime of drowning Chicken Little, inadvertently answers that it was Sula who did it saying:

[Eva] "Tell me how you killed that little boy."

[Nel] "What? What little boy?"

[Eva] "The one you threw in *the water*. I got oranges. How did you get him in *the water*?"

[Nel] "I didn't throw no little boy in *the river*. *That was Sula*."

[Eva] "You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched." (168, Italics mine)

Nel is caught off guard by Eva asking such absurd questions, and she lets slip what she really thinks. Nel answers "the river" when Eva only said "the water," and goes on to confess her involvement in the incident by saying, "That was Sula." (Nel's words to Eva, a senile old lady, are not likely to compromise her reputation.) Eva's words suggesting that Nel and Sula have the same identity awaken Nel to the fact that they are virtually inseparable, even long after Sula's death. Sula was able to restrain her desire for Nel by becoming Nel herself; whereas, Nel concealed her desire for Sula, identifying herself with other people in the community who regard Sula as an enemy or traitor. Both Rochelle, Nel's grandmother, and Sula wear yellow clothes, the outfit for women who are forced into the lowest strata of society and considered pariahs. Nel was able to conceal her sin and desire by despising these women along with other people.

Nel's unexpected confession to Eva sets her off to reveal another secret to the readers: the dialogue exchanged between Sula and Nel right after Sula returned from Shadrack's house in 1922. The "closed water" image comes back again before and after the dialogue that is salvaged from her faded memories:

[Sula] "*Shouldn't we tell?*"

[Nel] "*Did he see?*"

[Sula] "*I don't know. No.*"

[Nel] "*Let's go. We can't bring him back.*" (170)

From this dialogue that is revealed to the readers for the first time, they are finally allowed to know that while Sula proposed to confess their crime, Nel was afraid that Shadrack might have seen what they had done, and suggested they both keep their mouths shut. Then the moment of revelation finally comes to Nel:

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. (174)

The novel ends with the fantasy-like scene as cited above, but what does this scene mean?

There is an image that exactly corresponds to this scene, in the passage describing Nel's anguish after Jude left her. Betrayed by her husband and her best friend, she suffers in pain, kneels on the bathroom floor, and with her hand on the cold rim of the bathtub, "she waited for something to happen ... inside." Then, inside Nel, there is "stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves" (107). Since this is immediately followed by her memories of Chicken Little's funeral, it is safe to say that the description of the moving mud and dead leaves refers to the bottom of the river where Chicken Little sank. While Nel waits for a cry to be released from deep inside herself, the "mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her" (108) as if announcing the beginnings of her very howl. What is secretly moving hidden under the water, or what should have been manifested as a howl, is Nel's desire itself. However, there was no howl and the "odor evaporated; the leaves were still, the mud settled" (108). Instead of a howl, a dirty "gray ball" shows up, that will be floating in the air beside her over the coming decades. Nel could not confront the "ball of muddy strings" because the ball reminds her of the river bottom where her secrets lie.

What Nel sank deep in the river with Chicken Little is her homoerotic desire for Sula. In the summer of 1922 it certainly existed, and presented itself to Nel and Sula who started awakening to their sexuality. Just before her death, Sula remembers their "digging of holes in the earth" when she and Nel ran up the bank of the river (146). There are unmistakable connotations in the act of the girls digging deep holes in the earth together, and the two holes joining one another. Nel's fear and loathing for the connected holes are represented in her act of throwing debris into the hole and replacing the soil. The recurrent image of the "closed water" not only suggests her sin of killing Chicken Little; but also signifies where her own sexuality that she had locked up really lies. There was only one occasion when Nel almost went deep down to the bottom of the closed water and got close to the desire that she had suppressed, so that she could reveal everything with a howl. Nel smelled the mud, the dead leaves, and the rotten plants at the bottom of the river, and felt they were about to show themselves, moving and screaming. However, just as her unrealized confession of the killing of Chicken Little, Nel's love/desire for Sula remains sealed, and these two secrets turn into a "dirty" ball that continues to threaten Nel.

However, after a period of forty-three years, Nel's sin and love/desire that had all been submerged deep in the water start to move again. Since Nel uses the grammatically correct "We were" elsewhere in the novel, Nel's revelatory words "We was girls together" (174) are neither a wrong use of the singular verb nor a usage common in African-American vernacular English, but they point to the shared identity of Nel and Sula. Sula also speaks of their relationship using the image of bodily unification when she remembers the days when they were "two throats and one eye" (147). The "dirty" ball of fur breaks and scatters countless dandelion spores in the wind. Just like the spores flying up into the beautiful sky, Nel's words "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl"

suggest that the two women's desires, of which unity and oneness have been emphasized, will burst open in all directions and fly freely up in the air. However, the revelation came to Nel too late, and as in the ending of Morrison's previous novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the circular and cyclical movement of sorrow that never ends suppresses the upward movement of flying.

Notes:

1) For more information about the Chicken Little fairy tale, visit the following website:
<http://eleaston.com/chicken.html>, <http://www.geocities.com/mjloundy>

2) Maki Tonegawa writes in her "Shadrack's Shell Shock—A Rereading of *Sula*" that Chicken Little, "small as he is, represents a man of the patriarchy society"(142).

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